Captain Joseph-Elzéar Bernier -

North of 60°

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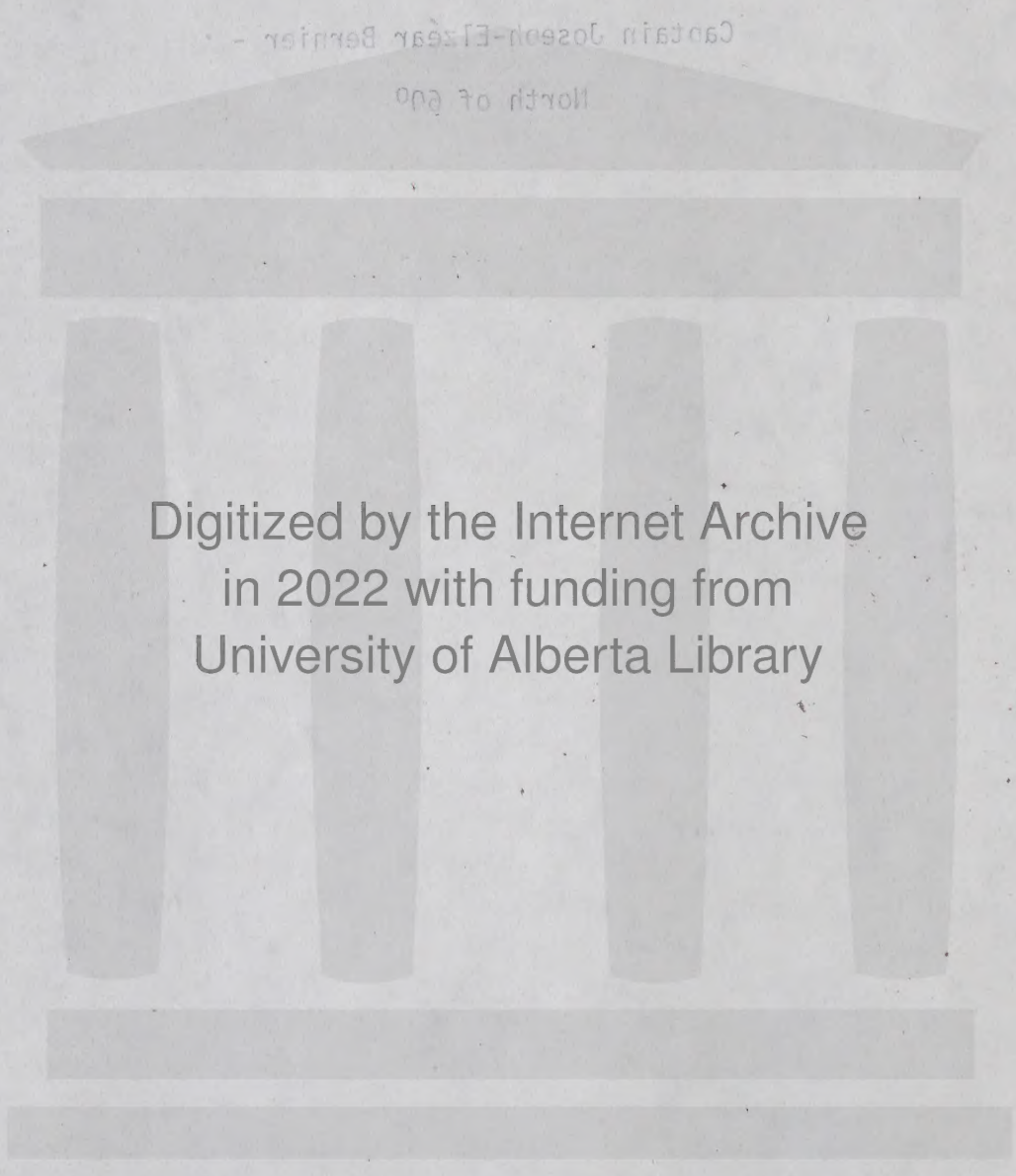

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BACKGROUNDER

# CAPTAIN JOSEPH-ELZÉAR BERNIER - NORTH OF 60°

Dean of Arctic Explorers and Architect of Canadian Sovereignty in the Arctic

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July 31, 1980 was proclaimed "Canadian Arctic Islands Centennial Commemoration Day ... from sea ... to sea ... to sea" by Governor General Edward Schreyer and the period to October 9th has been set aside to mark the centennial.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the transfer to Canada from Great Britain of the group of islands running northward into the Arctic Ocean. The British Order-in-Council was signed by Queen Victoria, July 31, 1880. The transfer took effect September 1, 1880 and was published in the Canada Gazette on October 9, 1880.

One of Canada's concerns after the transfer was that other countries might try to claim the Arctic Islands. Whalers, traders, explorers and scientists from around the world travelled through the Canadian Arctic. Thus, from 1897 the Canadian Government gave the area constant attention.

In 1906, Captain Joseph-Elzéar Bernier, as Commander of the expedition and Fisheries Officer, sailed on the D.G.S. Arctic to proclaim jurisdiction over the Arctic Islands. This was the first of three official voyages (and subsequent winterings) he would undertake for the Canadian Government between 1906 and 1911.

On July 1,1909 Captain Bernier, promoter, defender and architect of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, made his most famous proclamation. At Winter Harbour on Melville Island he unveiled a tablet at Parry's Rock which marked the annexation of the whole Archipelago lying

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north of America from 60° to 140° west Longitude (the Canada-Alaska boundary line) as far north as 90° (the North Pole) as Canadian Territory and under Canadian jurisdiction.

Captain Bernier, born January 1, 1852 at L'Islet, Quebec, inherited the courage, resourcefulness and determination of his French-Canadian, seafaring forebears and, at 17 years of age, made his first voyage commanding his father's brigantine Saint-Joseph, bound for England from Quebec.

Although his lifelong ambition was to claim the North Pole for Canada, this was to elude him. During ten trips for the Canadian government he took possession of many islands in the Arctic Archipelago over an area of 1 348 866 km squared. These include Victoria, Ellesmere, Banks, Devon, Axel Heiberg, Melville, Prince of Wales, Somerset, Bathurst, Prince Patrick and many smaller islands. Of all the explorers sent by the Canadian government to take possession of Arctic territory, Bernier is credited with claiming the greatest number of islands. He also recovered the greatest number of documents left behind by previous expeditions.

A Toronto Star article was quoted in the House of Commons Debates February 27, 1908 by Mr. J. Taylor (Leeds):

> "... Captain Bernier may not have found the Pole, but he can find an island with his eyes shut. He is the greatest island namer and claimer in the business ..."

Captain Bernier's career as Master Mariner makes a fourfold appeal - to those who love the sea; to those who wish for knowledge of the great Canadian ship-and-timber age; the growing interest in the Northwestern exit via Hudson's Bay; the fourth - the present, past and future of the vast Arctic Archipelago.

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Captain Bernier's plan was to enter the polar sea through the Bering Strait and let his ship become frozen in the ice and drift slowly with the current towards the East,passing over or near the Pole and issuing into the Atlantic, after travelling approximately four years.

Other than the Quebec Geographical Society which supported Captain Bernier from the outset and introduced him to the learned societies of Europe, the most important backing came from the Royal Colonial Institute of London, in 1901. Also that year, the Royal Society of Canada endorsed the Bernier Polar Expedition. The Vancouver Board of Trade offered him $10,000 if he would build his ship in Vancouver.

After Bernier spent years lecturing before learned bodies and the public and expended $21,000 of his own money,Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Sir Robert Borden and the Rt. Honourable Arthur Meighen cooperated in securing a vote of $20,000 to outfit a Canadian Polar Expedition under his command. In the spring of 1904, with five years supplies on board the D.G.S.Arctic, he was ready to sail around the Horn en route to Vancouver and the Bering Sea. Instead, the Government commissioned him to establish Mounted Police Posts in the Hudson Bay District, with Major J.D. Moodie of the Royal North-West Mounted Police as commander of the expedition, to Bernier's bitter disappointment.

History will credit Bernier with being the first to establish Canadian government controls over whaling in the Eastern Arctic, particularly the region surrounding Baffin Island. His government expeditions (1906-07, 1908-09,1910-11) brought welcome supplies to outposts, added to the southern knowledge of the north and flew Canada's flag far and wide over the Arctic Islands. To further secure his country's sovereignty, between 1912 and 1917 Bernier established three trading posts in the region of Pond Inlet and for the next seven years completely controlled all activities in the region.

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1922 was a turning point in the history of the Canadian North. The government called Captain Bernier out of retirement to command the Arctic in the Eastern Arctic Patrol. Ordered to set up and supply several RCMP posts, the Patrol marked the government's first official occupation of the Archipelago. With his 1925 voyage Captain Bernier's Arctic career ended. However, in 1927, at the age of seventy-five, he was commissioned by the Department of Railways and Canals to pilot a tug leading a convoy of barges transporting coal from Halifax to Port Burwell, destined for ships scheduled to operate in Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait the following summer.

From 1895 until his death December 26, 1934 at the age of 82 at Lévis, Quebec, this tireless sea captain who had sailed 778,375 kilometers, constantly strove to make Canadians aware of the importance of securing their country's sovereignty in the Arctic.

There is a similarity between Joseph-Elzéar Bernier and Jacques Cartier. Both wanted to find the Northwest Passage but were thwarted by the mercilessly harsh climate. As Cartier did for France and his king, Bernier took possession of numerous Arctic Islands for Canada, and in doing so, laid claim to all mineral, animal and marine resources they contained. Captain Bernier expressed Canada's sovereignty as much by declaration of possessions as by distribution of fishing and hunting permits. To him, the Canadian Arctic represented a pool of wildlife and mineral resources and establishing Canadian territorial jurisdiction in the Arctic would enable Canadians to the south to benefit from these valuable resources.

Captain Joseph-Elzéar's two grand dreams - to conquer the North Pole and to sail through the Northwest Passage, were the major factors behind his seafaring Arctic career, but predominant was his desire to establish Canada's sovereignty North of 60°.

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